

somnath hore

The Tea-Garden Journal

TRANSLATED BY
SOMNATH ZUTSHI

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A worker's union movement was born in the mid-1930s in the tea gardens of Bengal, protesting the oppression of owners and managers. The struggle ranged union men, organized by the Communist Party on one side, against the owners; their thugs, the tea garden managers and the constabulary on the other. It is a tribute to the organizers and activists that they managed, despite such powerful opposing forces, to wrench concessions out of the companies.

It was to document this struggle that the Communist Party sent Somnath Hore, complete with sketchpad and journal.

This book is the result.

The Tea-Garden Journal



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TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI BY
SOMNATH ZUTSHI



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I have arrived at the kingdom of darkness in the dark of the night. From my childhood I had learnt that this was the land of coolies; there was no light to be found here.

Some 60 years ago, when the English merchants arrived to start their tea gardens, the one thing they relied upon was that no light had ever penetrated this area; nor would they allow any light to be lit.

Bihari, Madrasi, Oriya, Santhal, Oraon—people from all over the country, starving at home, had made this journey to a strange land, driven by the greed for something more. When they arrived, what they received was: a blanket, a steel *thaali*, a tumbler to drink from and a



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scrap of land for lying down on. In addition, they got to be part of a depraved social system entirely cut off from the world at large, and—wine shops.

Moreover, from the very start of their lives as coolies, they learnt that the Manager was the beginning and the end of all things; there was nothing greater than him in the entire universe.

Old Pardesi said, 'The managers have stored a great deal of sorrow in those hills you see there. Occasionally cracks appear here and there and the smoke pours out!'

I remember that following a brief downpour during my last day here, the hills were covered by what looked like hazy clouds. But Nagen Dey informed me that it was not clouds I was seeing, but smoke. Perhaps this is what Pardesi had taken to be the smoke from accumulated anguish. Who knows?

A strapping coolie from one of the estates apparently told the Manager, 'I'm running a high fever today, Sir. I won't be able to do any hoeing.' The answer he received was—a savage beating and death! Only the old can tell us how many whimpers of pain remain hidden in every footstep. They can also tell us why no pretty girl should be born in the worker's slums: because they have no right to their beautiful girls. As soon as one grows up, she has to be delivered to the clutches of the Manager, to be the prey to his lust. These people weren't even able to contemplate marriage with any sense of assurance. One couple, Gonu and Sarala of Darmara Tea Garden, married and, indeed, had the temerity to hope for a modicum of happiness despite the unending misery that surrounded them. Their hopes were soon

dashed, however, when the Manager's middleman, Aparnacharan, arrived on His orders. He had come to pick up Sarala and deliver her to the Manager.

This was established custom during the days of the white owners. The regime of the native owners has worsened things, not improved them.

A large number of white owners sold their estates at the end of World War I. Among the people who took their place were such people as B. K. Roy Choudhury (who bought Bharat Tea Co. Ltd), Mahalaxmi Bank (they bought Rangapani Tea Estate), Chandmal Bhatia (Bullion & Co. Ltd) and other Indian owners. The change of ownership, however, left the system of the tea gardens unchanged, except that now there were 20 tea estates, large and small, as opposed to the previous eight. And over this extensive area roam dark-skinned men and women from all over India; they raise the embankments during the monsoons and use shovels to dig during the winters. The men receive wages of eight annas a day; the women, six. They live in extreme penury with their children and occasionally, drink moonshine to get merry and forget their miseries.

Then came the global financial disaster of 1930-31. The daily wages came down to four annas for men, three annas for women and two annas for children. The less they became capable of working, the worse grew the repression. Pushed beyond all endurance by the unending oppression, the previously mute exploded in fury. 'Who are you to beat us?' they asked, demanding explanations. Then back to the moonshine-induced stupors and the factionalism resulting from helplessness.







W. 1717.

1871







A Congress activist arrived at Halda Valley Tea Estate in 1936. This was one Sushanta Choudhury and he had come to organize a membership drive for the Congress Party. The Manager of the estate was Bhuvan Guha; and, through his good graces, not only did dear Mr Choudhury manage to recruit members for the Congress Party, he also managed to effectively sort out his own timber business. Having thus killed two birds with one stone, Mr Choudhury departed, never to be seen or heard from again, at least on behalf of the Congress Party.

From the Andamans, across the ocean, came Nagen Dey—a party worker of a rather different kind—who had taken part in the famous Bethua robbery. Having read and contemplated a lot during his stint in jail, he came to the conclusion that the real struggle for independence consisted of working for the peasants and workers.

He started the first worker's union, with a membership of around 70/80 at Neptune Tea Garden, after holding secret meetings, night after night, under the huge *garjan* trees.

From here, this clandestine movement to build trade unions spread to Fatikchhari Tea Garden. It had to remain clandestine in order to avoid being noticed by the Manager. The other day, pointing to a mango tree in Darmara Tea Garden, Nagen Dey described to me how he had managed to save himself from an attack by three thugs. The people of the surrounding villages would never have learnt where Nagen Dey disappeared to had the *lathi* blows landed that day.

In 1943, the famine arrived. While their wages didn't rise, their workload didn't lessen. They went to work

each morning after drinking a bowl of salty tea and returned gasping to their shacks each evening. The daily wages for digging an area of eight hands by 512 hands was four annas. Unfortunately, the amount of food that could be purchased for four annas was insufficient to provide the strength for hard labour. Therefore, once the underfed worker became incapable of digging such a large area of land, his wages were reduced to two annas a day! The market price for one-and-three-quarter seer of rice was one rupee.

They left the gardens in droves and died in multitudes. Even today, the villagers have anguished memories of the moaning of near-dead babies suckling at their dead mothers' breasts.

Movements started wherever there were unions and wages went up somewhat as a result; but by much less than what was necessary. Some gardens, out of fear of the union-led movements, increased wages to start with. As for those who refused (for instance, Chandmial Bhatia), they were pressured by the government acting on behalf of the unions and forced to increase wages.

The work of building the union spread to new areas during the start of 1944. As announcements and bulletins spread from tea garden to tea garden, workers heard the news with keen interest—how the workers of such and such a garden were standing up with heads held high and saying in an united voice, 'You will have to treat us like human beings.'

They in turn would whisper to one another and form groups, and, in the dark of the night, meet the union organizer to ask, 'What is to be done?' This is precisely how the union movement started at Rangapani Tea Garden.



13.5.67



13.5.47



13.5.47

A little thatched cottage on top of a small hill—the workers call it the Ashram. A number of workers have congregated here in the dark of the night in order to form a union. They grow food on small personal plots by dint of back-breaking labour during their spare time and the company forcibly takes away two-thirds of the crop. However, one of the things they learnt from the financial crisis of last year was that it was critical not to let their produce out of their hands. They have therefore decided to store their crop in their own granary and give the company one-third instead of two-thirds. They have other demands as well: 'increase wages', 'stop the Manager's excesses' and so on. However, unity and solidarity are required for such enterprises to succeed. This is why they have gathered. In front of them is the traditional pot covered with flowers, filled with water and containing copper coins and *tulsi* leaves. They look at each other awkwardly, too frightened to take such a potent oath, fearful of the consequences.

Rashmohan is another matter altogether: holding the pot firmly in his hands, he is the first to take the oath. 'I will build the union, I will obey the union and I will share the fate of my brothers in the union.' His dark, massive physique, huge moustache and personality give the rest of the assembly reassurance. Slowly, each of them takes the oath. 'The Union is Our Family.' Rashmohan's eyes light up even today when he speaks about taking that oath. 'The company brought in troops in order to frighten us. But we told the Manager, we aren't frightened of your soldiers. In what way are we less than them? You've got six soldiers, we have two hundred. We are united.'





14.5.47



The company threatened them with dire consequences, including bringing in criminal charges and death. The workers calmly went about harvesting their crops and storing it in their granary.

Finally, having entirely run out of alternatives, the company sent someone (Apurva Das) to make enquiries. During the subsequent investigations, the company ledgers revealed that the workers owed the Mahalaxmi Bank almost 2,500 rupees and about 1,500 maunds of rice!

The workers were quite bewildered by the revelation. 'Why do we owe money?' 'Why do we owe grain?'—one can hear Shatrughna, the Oriya labourer, still asking these questions.

Blandly, the company explained, 'Don't worry, it's of no consequence at all; just a way for us to balance our books. We have no intention of foreclosing the debts.'

Gobinda says, 'We don't fight for the fun of it, you know. Childhood onwards, all we've ever learnt is that you owe the company this and you owe the company that—but you aren't owed a single blessed thing. Please believe me when I say that I'm not exaggerating a bit when I tell you that, after working all day in rain and storm, I managed to pick up a piece of deadfall wood about this size. The company clerk weighed it and said it was 50lb in weight. He deducted 15 pounds from the deadfall. (The usual weight of deadfall is about 2 to 3 pounds.) I had no idea those days how a piece of deadfall could be 35 pounds. Even worse, I discovered that the piece of wood that had been 50 pounds in weight had now somehow become 80 pounds. It's this sort of cheating that is destroying us.'



17.5.47







117. f. 47

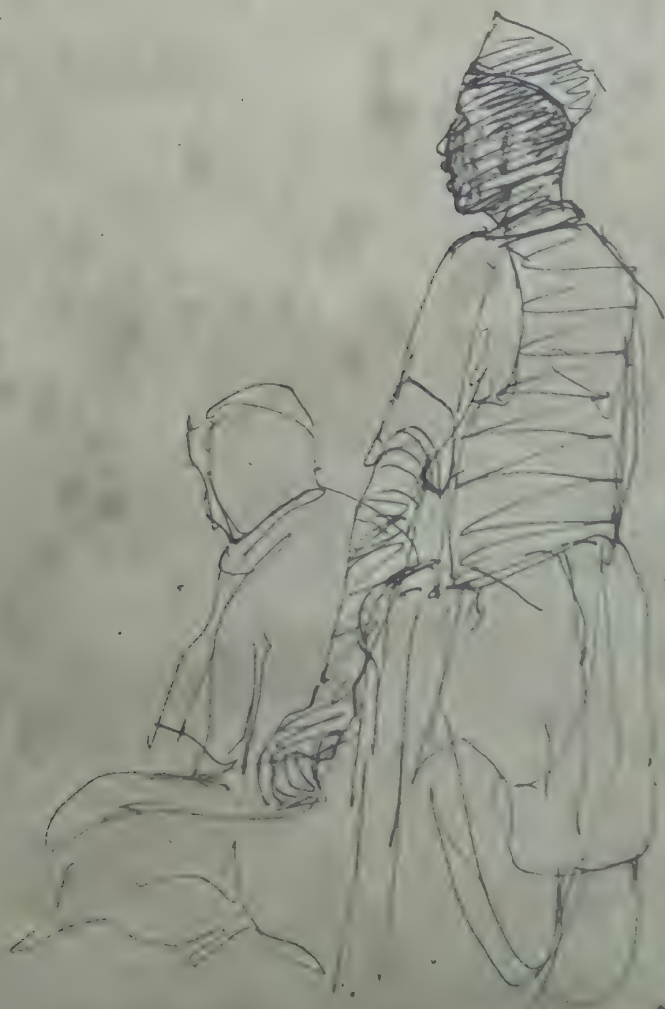
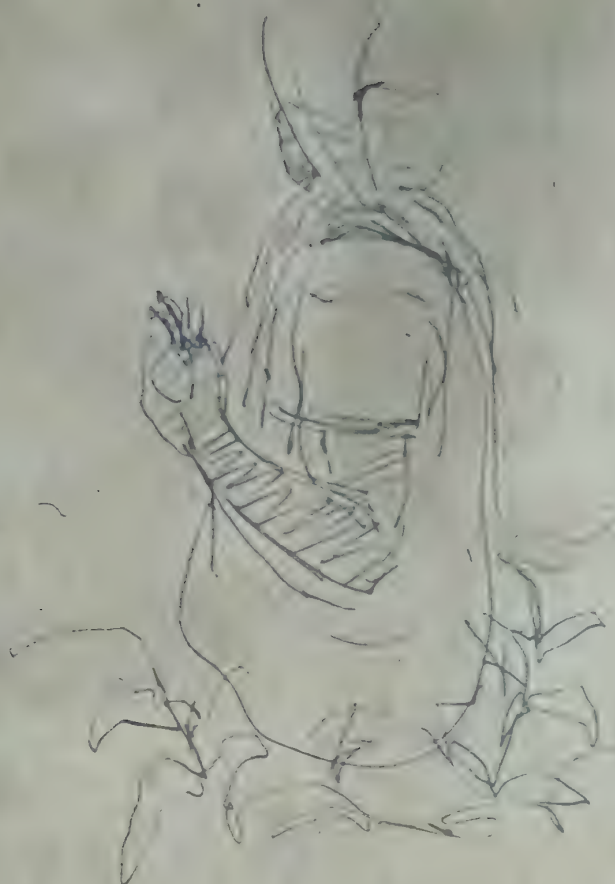




15.5.47

—J. R. M. W. C.







I was enquiring after Sukchand and Suryamani's family. Sukchand has worked in the gardens for 27 years, Suryamani for 17. The fruits of the combined 44 years of labour by this couple are as follows:

A tumbledown cottage, (one-third of which is occupied by the cow), two daughters, two sons, four beds, two drinking glasses, two small bowls, two pans, one serving dish, one chopper, one decent *dhoti* and another torn, three saris between mother and daughters, two torn saris for the boys with one boy in a breech cloth and the other in a pair of shorts, about 10 chickens and ducks combined, two cows, several pieces of torn clothing, a broken hurricane lantern, and bow and arrows.

It goes without saying that Sukchand is not very comfortable.

During the enquiry, the following demands were made on behalf of the workers:

- 1/ Work must resume in the garden in a proper manner.
- 2/ Daily wages: Male workers: 10 annas; Women workers: eight annas.
- 3/ Three to five *kaani* of land per family. The rent to be fixed at Rs 2 per *kaani*.
- 4/ Paid maternity leave.
- 5/ The right to store their rice crop in their own granaries.
- 6/ No rent to be charged for their dwellings.

And so on.

The authorities accepted a number of the demands to some extent or the other.

The wages were fixed at eight annas for men and six annas for women.

During the discussions that day, Rashmohan stood up the moment their principal demands had been accepted. He thumped the table and looked the Manager in the eye. 'Now then, Manager-babu,' said Rashmohan. 'From today you can't beat us any more!'

Looking rather embarrassed, the Manager said, 'Beat you? Who's beaten you?'

'You have,' answered Rashmohan. 'You're the one who's been beating us all these days. Now you'll have to stop your injustice. We're human beings too.'

The perception of their own humanity spread from tea garden to tea garden. At Sigamagan and Barmasiva, the workers started saying, 'Rangapam has lit the fire.'

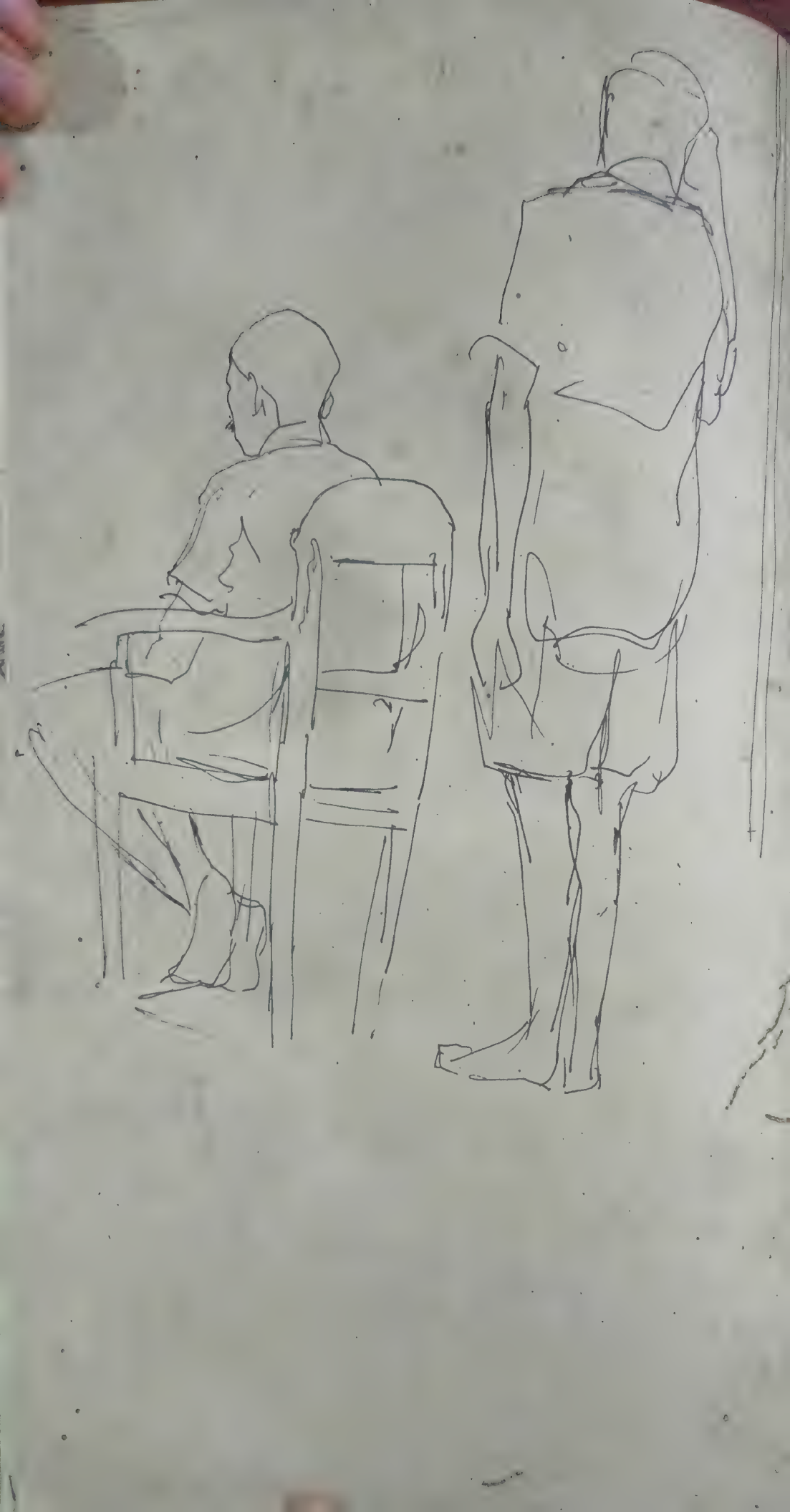


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W.S. 67







14.54



14.5



15.5.47



This success came during the early months of 1945. During the October of this year, Mahalaxmi Bank sold the garden to Hill Top Tea Estate. Satinath Mukherjee is Managing Director of the firm.

Some time during the end of the year, on a day when a meeting was being held in the local market, the red flag waving over the meeting with workers gathered under it, who should arrive but Satinath Mukherjee. Apparently, he was on his first visit after having acquired the garden.

'There are red flags flying over my garden! Pull them down, lower them immediately. I can't bear the sight of the red flag!' He was nonplussed to see that not even one worker made any attempt to lower the flags.

The man was escorted to the bungalow by the Manager. 'Let them hold their meeting, Sir. Don't say anything.'

The workers, however, were much amused when they came to learn that the gentleman was saying, 'Yes of course, let 'em have their meeting. I approve of such things myself.'

In the meanwhile, the Rangapani workers were amazed to see a group of striking workers from Barmasiya and Sujanagar, led by Subol Mazi and Bishu Sardar, approaching Rangapani. Seeing them standing at their door, they all came running across, Madhu, Sukchand, Pardesi Thakur and many others, and embraced them.

But why had they come to Rangapani?

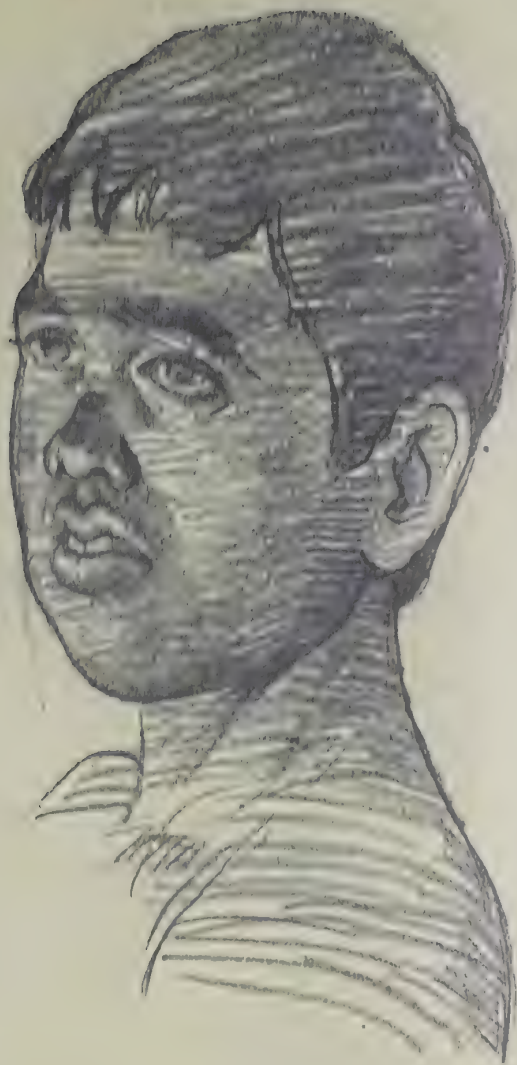
To provide an answer to this question, one has to speak a little of Subol Mazi. Subol was a worker at Sujanagar Tea Estate. When the union was formed, he was one of the very best activists. Within a few days of joining, he played a crucial role in the land occupation movement. From that moment on, he was in the Manager's bad books. The management, in the meanwhile, had made false allegations to the police against the union leadership and workers. They had had them arrested, which had angered the work force enormously. The resulting protest had taken the shape of a strike, but a leaderless strike had petered out in three weeks. Several months later, after the leaders were released, they had advised Subol to take 50 men and come here.

En route to Rangapani, they had been attacked by company goons, who had taken away 500 rupees, plus 11 of Subol's cows, as well as 10 goats and about 14 chickens. The Manager, Tarak Patranabis, had kept all their belongings under lock and key and sent him a proposal: 'Bring your band back to the garden and I'll not only return your belongings, but pay you a thousand rupees as well.'

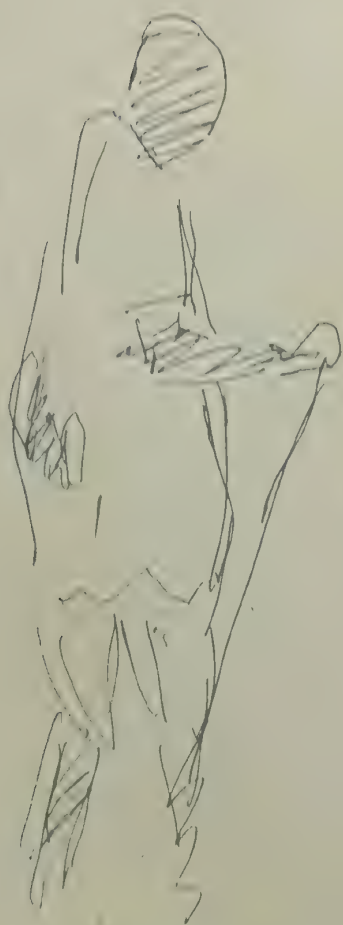
A *gamchhaa* wrapped around his head—a makeshift turban—Subol Mazi's calm gaze seems somewhat out of place in his high cheekboned face. Lifting his calm eyes, he says in a measured voice, 'He thought he could play on my greed, that Manager. I started proceedings against him, Comrade; but not for the mere sake of having my possessions returned. No, it's to carry on the struggle. I've tied this turban because I want to fight this injustice. As long as the struggle continues, I'm not taking it off.'

Subol's struggle continues at Rangapani as well. Hence, his turban remains.





ਰਹਿ, ੫੭੬



Puran, 17.5.41

The Rangapani workers responded by starting a movement for food, clothes and money, finding jobs at Rangapani Estate, procuring plots of land for cultivation as well as living quarters and even ration cards for these men.

This forced the company to play its last card, i.e. divide and conquer. They bought several people, including Etoya Sardar, Shyam Sardar, Durga Oraon, etc.

From shanty town to shanty town, the news spread like wildfire. 'These fellows are company stooges.' Even Modhu Sil, the village barber says, 'I won't shave them!' The village chief is furious: 'These people have insulted the Red Flag. We'll have nothing to do with them.'

I can still remember Abala's comment. Abala was resting after having picked up deadfall. Next to her was a portion of hollow green bamboo, filled with water. 'Doesn't the company provide you drinking water?'

'It did,' she replied. 'But I've told the man not to bother. The fellow's a company stooge. I'd feel sick if I drank water from his hands.'

Actually, the lines were drawn rather more sharply than that: after being sent away for two days running, the water supplier said on the third day, 'If you lot don't accept this water, I'm going to pour your share on the ground in your name.' Abala exploded. 'Who the hell d'you think you are, you miserable so-and-so. We're dead, are we, that you'd pour water on the ground in our name. Get out of here before I whip you out!'

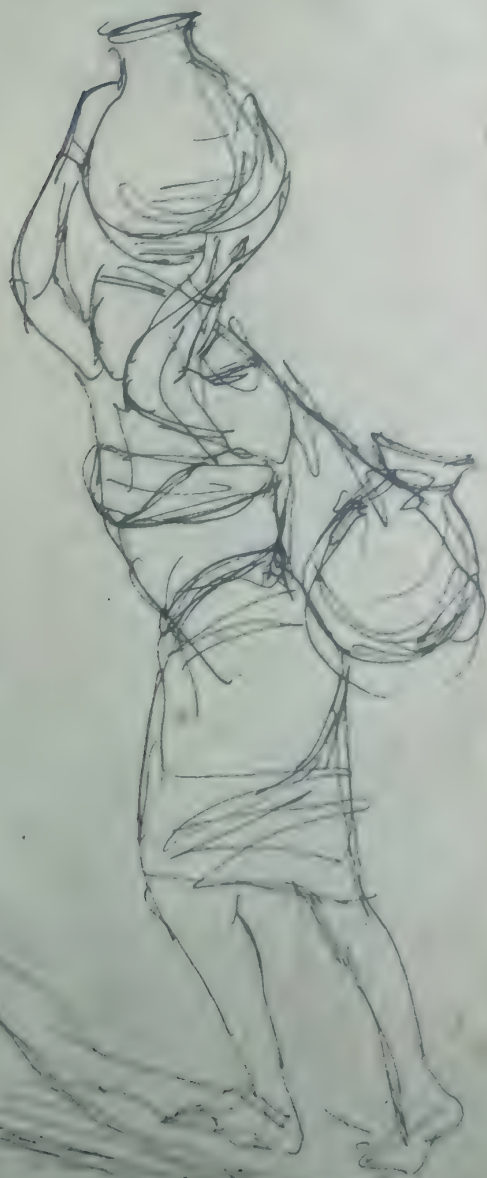
Eighteen-month-old Puran, a great nephew many times removed of Etoya Sardar, goes round shouting, 'Etoya Sardar is a stooge, don't forget, don't forget!' 'Shyam Sardar is a stooge . . .' He learnt these from his mother.







150



151



15.5.47









17.5.01

The union put a set of demands to the company during February 1947. Satinath Mukherjee duly turhed up, vacillated and prevaricated, hemmed and hawed and expressed his feelings about Tebhaga: 'It's a form of madness. It's not going to happen,' etc. etc.

The workers were incensed.

In mid-March, the company sacked Bishu and tried to intimidate Pardesi.

The union demanded 'Bishu must be reinstated!' They gave the company 24 hours' notice to accept this and their previous list of demands.

Strike was declared on 23 March. The OC from the police station turned up in full force and arrested eight people, including Modhu, Rashmohan, Shatrughna, Bishu and Tupu. In the meanwhile having heard the news, the women arrived armed with their brooms, the men with their *lathis*.

Frightened, the OC said, 'Someone will have to guarantee bail.' The women shot back, 'Why the hell should we pay bail. We've done nothing wrong!'

In order to save the OC's face, the Superintendent said, 'I'll stand bail.' The women were entirely unimpressed. 'Why should you stand bail? Who asked you?' All possibilities having been exhausted, the helpless OC let the arrested men go and went on his way. The children thought up a brand new slogan, 'Shame, shame, asks for bail!'

The strike continues for a long time. The massed footsteps of men and women marching in unison seem to make the local earth tremble; their uplifted voices make the distant hilltops resonate.

The local OC arrives once again, his usual threatening self, but has to withdraw in the face of silent worker resistance.

In between all this falls the date for the union's Third Annual Conference, on 17 and 18 April, at Rangapani itself. The starving, desperate workers donate what little they have left in order to make the conference a success. They also act as a beacon for the neighbouring gardens.

Several days after the conference, on 30 April, there was a sharp exchange of words between the OC and the strikers. The OC exploded and said, 'I'll shoot the lot of you—let's see who can stop me!'

The women immediately lay down in front of his jeep and started shouting, 'Shoot us, shoot us—we won't let you leave if you don't shoot us.'

The OC had to apologize before they let him go.

It was Sukchand's wife, a mother of four, who was the leader of this group. Therefore, when I hear her 18-month-old daughter saying, 'Stop the Manger's injustices,' I feel reassured. This bunch can pull it off.

* * *

On 3 May, in the presence of Ambika Chakrabarty, Kalpataru Sengupta and the local SDO, the Superintendent promised the following:

Bishu would be reinstated.

Each would receive one *aadi* of rice each week.

The guards and goons would be asked to leave.

All the false charges would be withdrawn.

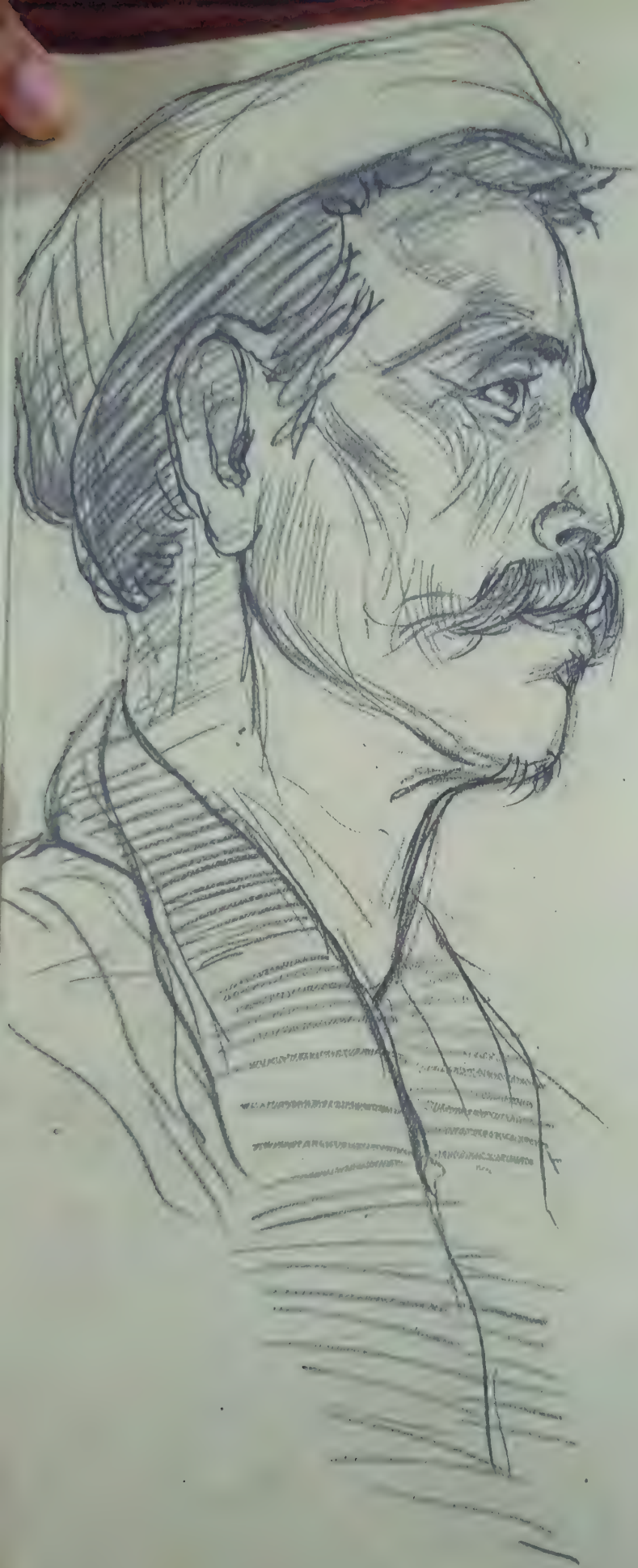
Wages: male workers, 12 annas; female workers, 10 annas.

Paid maternity leave at eight annas a day for eight weeks.

A few other minor demands were met with as well. The victorious workers returned to the fields.

* * *







Kachmani



Thambaiya 8

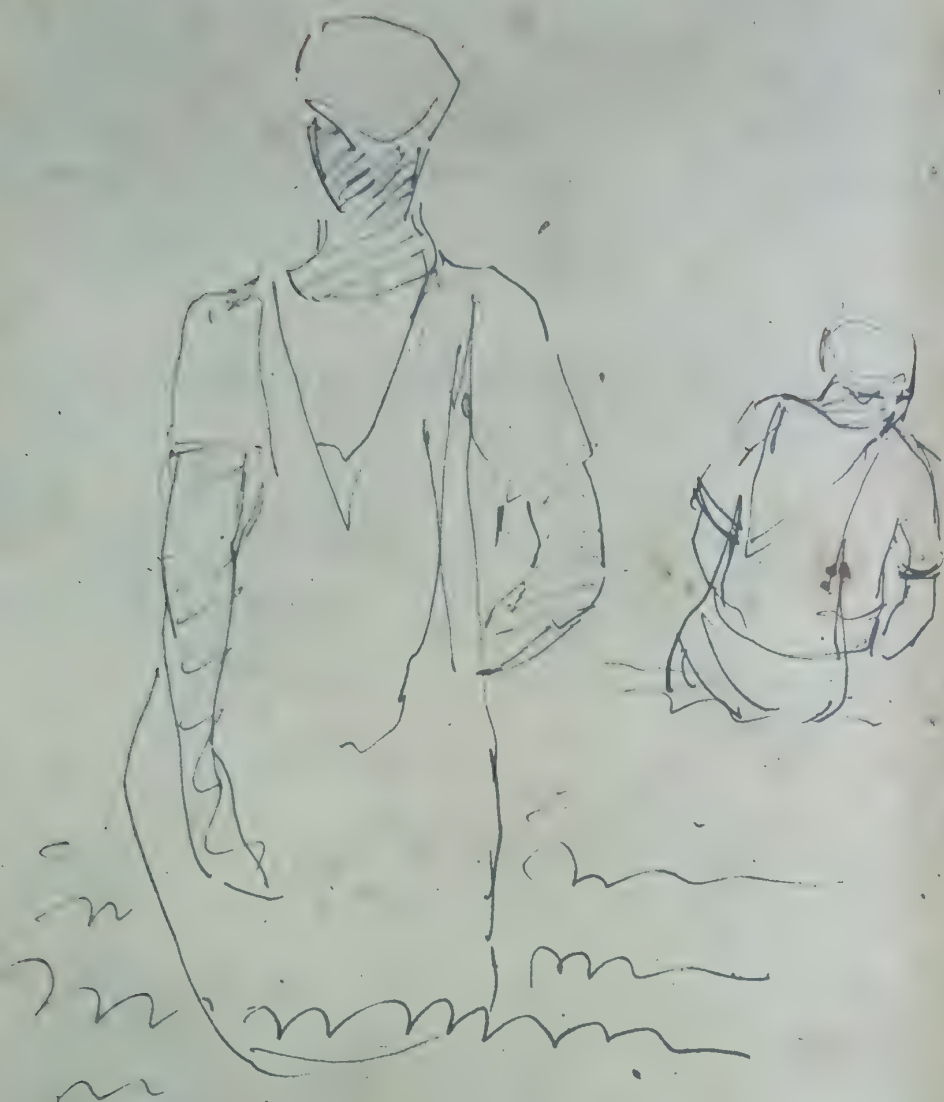


The Superintendent was at his bungalow, discussing something with Bishu, when a number of women from a distant village came marching down, shouting 'Inquilab Zindabad'. The Superintendent got into a funk and said, 'D'you hear what they are shouting, Bishu?' 'So what?' said Bishu. 'They're just having a good time.' 'Is that what they're doing?' said the Superintendent. 'I feel I'm going to have a heart attack every time I hear that slogan!'

On another day:

Rashmohan's wife, Padmabati, who had a job as a material sorter, used to take her youngest child to work. There, the lad got together with a few other young people of his age and went round shouting, 'Down with the Manager's injustices.' Surprised, and not a little embarrassed, the poor old Superintendent tried to send the boy up by giving him a handful of biscuits. Unfortunately, the silly child thought he was being rewarded for his excellent work and went round shouting twice as loudly. Padmabati had to be sent off on entirely different work in order for the Superintendent to be spared the resonance of this slogan.

There have been a few brief showers and the trees, having felt the touch of fresh rainwater, are all cracking in the fields. Along the countryside with their various hues, and in the various no-man's-lands a new scene is being the rounds. Golden things, over the pond, over the pond. Charming, the scene, but not so of the. Perhaps that the golden ring is the Manager's. The scene, the scene, the scene.





15.15

32.10.1911



22.54





Portrait of a man.

The company has taken no action on a number of the demands it had agreed to implement. Wages remain as before; the guards are still patrolling the garden; the people who had false cases made against them are still having to appear in court.

The company officials shuddered, hearing the marchers the other day, but they have not yet heard the voice of the land.

The other day: we are sitting at Dukhiram's house. Dukhiram is present, so is Ganga, as well as Bibhuti Das, Nagen Dey and several others. The nearby trees, like immobile monsters. Between them, the patches of sky gradually turning dark. Suddenly one hears the voice of the land. Dukhiram's grandchildren, aged between two and four, dark-skinned enough to almost merge with the earth, running around shouting: "Gang, land, leave India!"

From one side, Ganga calls out: "Shyamal!"

Dukhiram smiles gently and says: "It's not Shyamal, nor even Ramal. It's the land, the land itself. Comrade, the land itself speaks. We'll have to fight: the call of the land will remind us that we must fight."



Janga
18.547



HOEING

Light Hoeing: For 'light hoeing' an area 64 *nal* by 1 *nal* (1 *nal* = 8 hands), that is, digging this area one inch deep, the workers used to get four annas. After the mass movement, they get eight annas for light hoeing an area measuring 32 *nal* by 1 *nal*.

Deep Hoeing: For 'deep hoeing' (i.e. digging two-and-a-half inches deep) an area 24 *nal* by 1 *nal*, the workers used to be paid four annas. After the movement, the wages are eight annas for 'deep hoeing' an area of 12 *nal* by 1 *nal*.

Before the mass movement and during the famine, the worker's vitality had diminished to a degree that made it impossible for them to dig the required area of land. As a result, they found it difficult to earn more than two annas a day.

The most disgusting convention in this garden is the practice making women part of the labour force. There would be times when the women would be unable to earn even two annas, despite a whole day's back-breaking work.

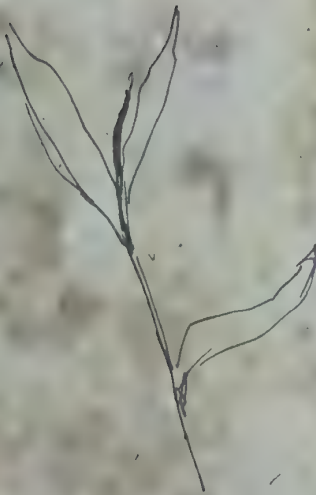
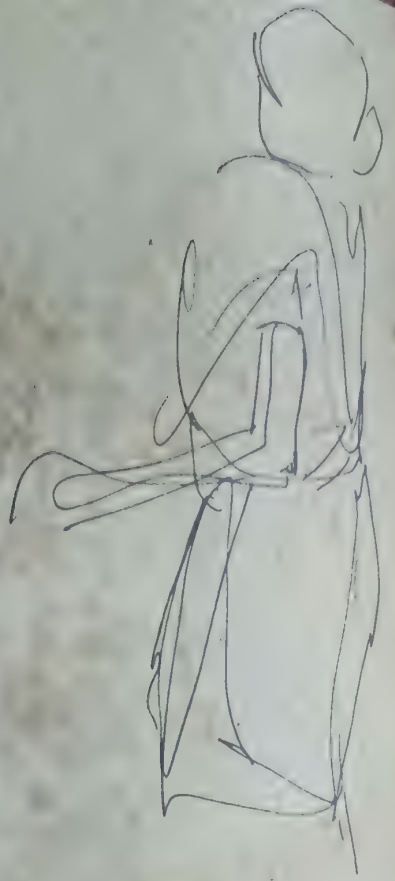
Goshtha said:

'How could you expect them to labour? You'll find it difficult to believe, Sir, but all they'd have would be a large bowl, about this big, of salt tea and go to work. After all tea's nothing but water.'

'But, I asked, why not eat rice and go to work?'

'Rice?' he looked astounded. 'How're they supposed to eat rice twice a day? A rupee'll buy you a seer and a half of rice in the market!'





Hoeing is basically a man's work. Women are occasionally made to hoe, but they are never paid the appropriate wages for the job. On the other hand, they are made to do all of the Manager's work, from giving him a massage to laundering his clothes, washing his dishes, husking his rice, sweeping his house and so on. There is no provision for the treatment of female diseases. In fact, there is little enough arrangement for ordinary treatments. Virtually none of the gardens have a qualified doctor on their rolls. Doctors are paid anything from 35 to 100 rupees a month. The clinics themselves have no medicines; any medicine is rapidly dispatched to the black market.

One incident:

In 1944, Dr Murari Mohan Chakrabarty, confessed, in answer to the questions of the Additional Civil Surgeon and the DSP that:

He had not studied medicine.

He had not studied pharmacy.

He had not studied homeopathy nor traditional Indian medicine.

He was practicing medicine out of 'habit'.

There is not a single garden which has a hospital.



PLUCKING

During Chaitra to Jaishtha (i.e. between March and May), the women are paid seven annas per day. (Men do not pluck during this season, being mostly engaged in hoeing.) They used to be paid four annas previously but, due to the union movement, their wages had risen by three annas from the end of 1943. From Aasharh to Kartik (i.e. the monsoons), the daily wages are based on the weight of leaves they pluck—one paisa for every two pounds plucked. During these months, both men and women pluck till about three in the afternoon. The best pluckers earn up to one rupée and 10 annas a day. To make their cup of woes spill over, this is the season for leeches and snakes. Furthermore, the ground is littered with leaves which exude some form of toxin, causing nasty sores in the foot and lower leg. Normally, the women sling their little children on their shoulders and take them to the gardens. Once there, the children are left in the shade of nearby trees while their mother is plucking leaves. This system prevails even during the rainy season, the result being that the children suffer terribly. A number of women are reluctant to take the children for fear of making them ill. As a result, they stay at home, missing the day's wages. Starvation is thus inevitable. Women work while pregnant, sometimes till the day before actual childbirth and are usually back at work within 48 hours or so after. Now, because of the union movement, the Rangapani authorities have said that they will give eight weeks of paid maternity leave, at the rate of eight annas a day. Chandmal Bhatia's garden pays two weeks of maternity leave. The other gardens give four rupees (of which two rupees are towards a midwife). It goes without saying there are no arrangements for a midwife in any of the gardens.



JAIRAM

He is a Bhumiya. These people live in the hills and are so called because they clear the forests and turn them into what is locally known as *jom*. (Making *jom* consists of cutting the scrub and undergrowth from small hills and setting it on fire. The burnt earth clears the growth. Then they plant rice, after turning the soil with their choppers. In between, they sow beans, maize, etc.) Their staple food is rice. Even though Buddhist by religion, some of their customs are similar to those of the Hindus. For instance, they are Kali worshippers. They worship the forest; they sacrifice chickens in its name. Their dwellings are built on stilts and they are very fond of personal ornaments. The Bhumiyas are a matriarchal society.

They might clear the wood in order to build their community, but they have no right whatsoever to the land.

Jairam had an 'arrangement' on 12 *kaani* of land but he lost it as soon as the garden went to the Mahalaxmi Bank. Now, Hill Top Company expropriates 20 *aadi* of rice per *kaani* of land (according to the *bargadar* system). Unfortunately, the maximum yield per *kaani* is 25 to 30 *aadi*. What this means is that one cannot even get one month's staple from cultivation. This is what forces them to work in the gardens.

(According to the ex-Manager of Rangapani Estate, Biren Banerjee, 'You've got to keep these fellows half starved. They'll refuse to work the moment they have a full belly.' This comment is sufficient to demonstrate that the evictions from the land, the unfair expropriations, etc., are all devices to force the Bhumiyas to work in the garden.)

Jairam is presently suffering from a severe illness—leprosy. Needless to say, there are no facilities which offer treatment. The illness has spread in the neighbourhood.

ASHARAM

Asharam is a party member. He was beaten up badly by a middleman's goons for not going to work during the strike. He has filed charges against the Superintendent, Shyam Sardar, Etoa Sardar and several others. (The Third Annual Conference of the Tea Garden Worker's Union took place at Rangapani on 18 April, this year. A violent disruption took place, presumably in order to disrupt the conference. This made the local workers furious and it took all the persuasive powers of the 'red flag' leaders to bring things under control.)

Asharam is one of the more enthusiastic party workers among the Bhumiyas.

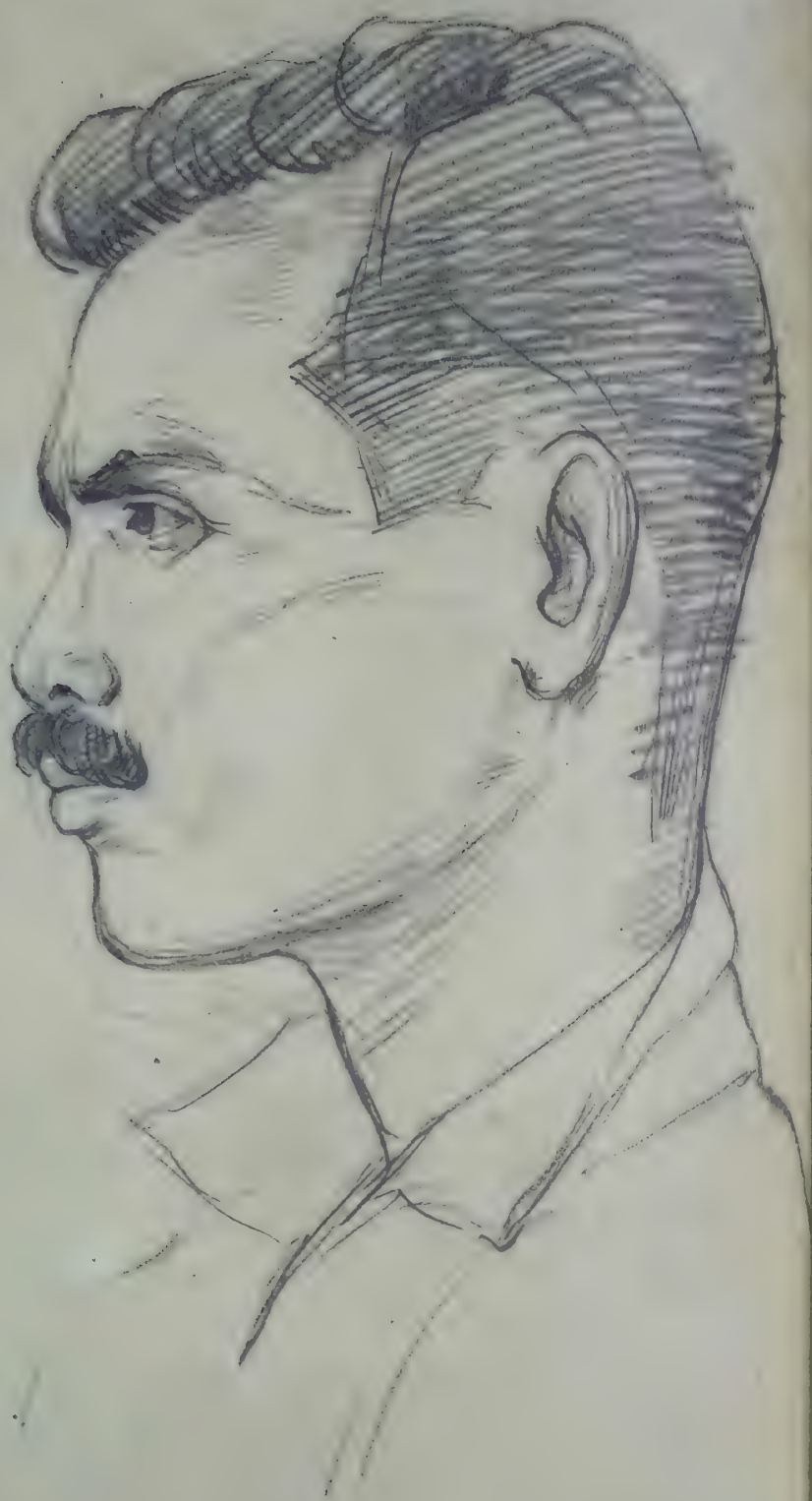
Very few houses in the neighbourhood; mostly tumble-down, a few built on stilts. There is not a stick of furniture in any of them. Things such as blankets, mosquito nets or pillows are beyond these people's wildest dreams. Indeed, even clothes are very few. The men are all in breech clouts, not one has a shirt on. The women wear a *lungi* and wrap a *gamchha* or a piece of cloth around their breasts. When they go to work, they wear a shirt and wrap a piece of cloth, turban-like, around their head. They keep chickens, goats, pigs etc. There are nine families in the neighbourhood, a total of 52 individuals.





1/10/1917





Kulachandran

15.5.46

KULACHANDRA

A party member, he founded the trade union movement among the Bhumiya community. As a result, he found himself in the management's black books and was forced to give up his job. He now works as a guard in the Forest Department and on the basis of demands for wages, kerosene, ration, etc., tries to organize the Bhumiya of the Reserve Forest.

In response to a sharp rebuke from the forester, he apparently told the man, 'I'm a communist, y'know. We're poor and used to surviving through our labour. So what do I care if I lose my job here. I'll get a job somewhere else. We don't worry about our jobs.'

He is married and has two sons and one daughter

RATACHANDRA

There are five of them living in a room, eight hands by six hands, along with a cow and its calf. They cook in the same room. All their entire belongings put together amount to one *thaali*, one drinking glass, two earthen pitchers and two earthen *handis*.

BISHU SARDAR

He came to Rangapani from Sujanagar, along with Subol Mazi. He started working for the union here as well and, as a result, got into the Superintendent's bad books. He was dismissed by the Superintendent on the basis of trumped-up charges. His reinstatement was the most important demand during the last strike. Currently, he has been reinstated, though as a watchman and not a foreman.

Party member.

He is a fine hunter and very brave.

He is also an expert brawler.

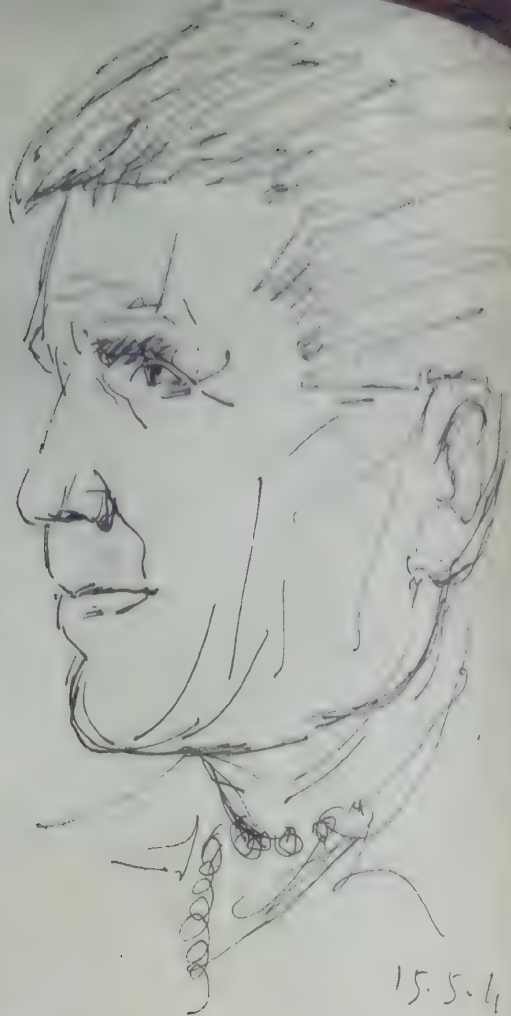
His son calls the Superintendent 'Pig's leg'.

MODHU SIL

He was against the union to start with. Later, under the influence of his son Basanta, he changed his mind. He donated five *aadi* of rice during the last conference. He helped the workers in many ways during the strike. He is a barber.

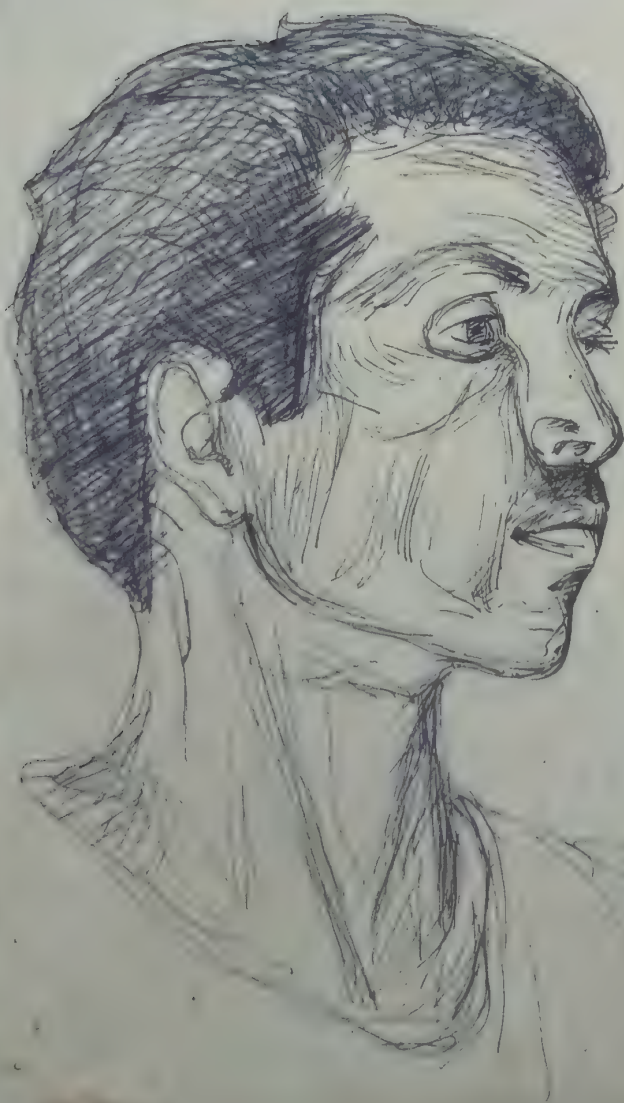


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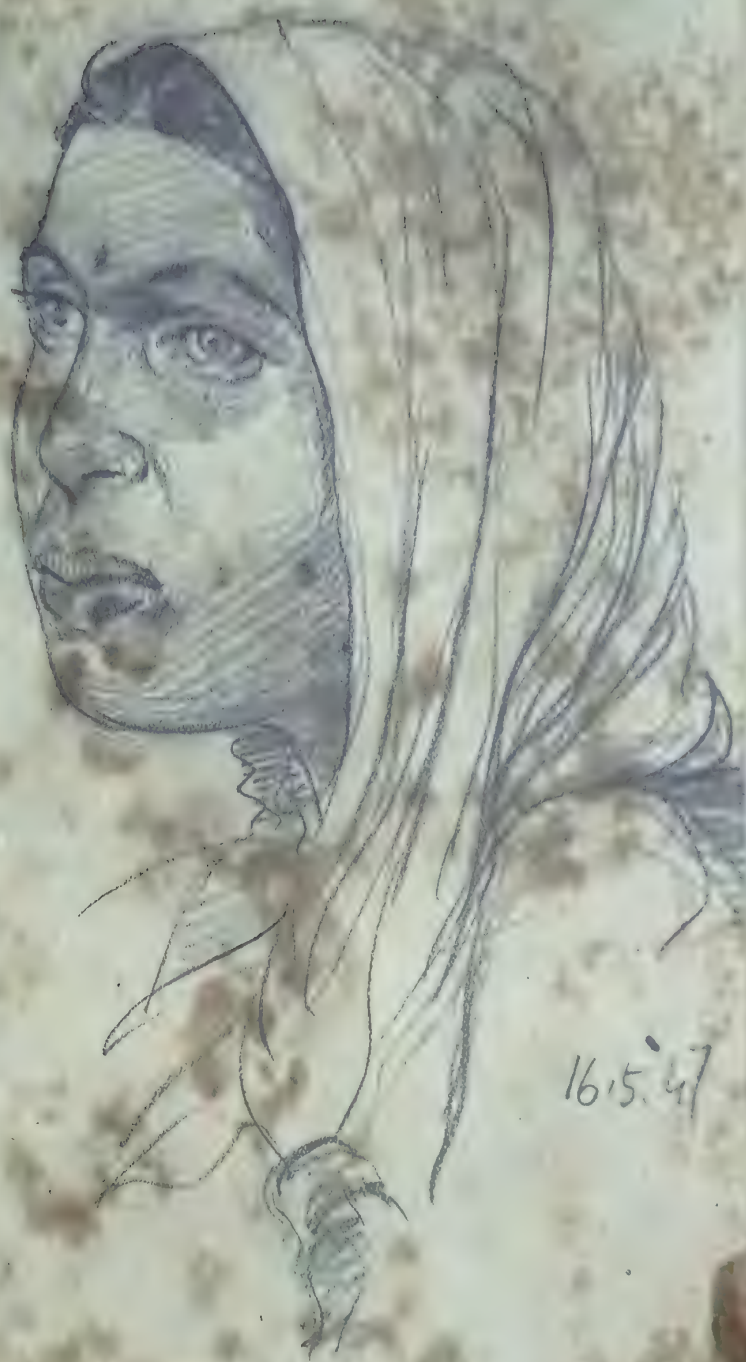
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16.5.47

16.5.47
W. of Madhu



16.5.5

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DU KHIRAM'S MOTHER

Over 50 years old, she worked very hard indeed during the conference. She was in charge of the communal kitchen and, it is worth noting that she discharged her duties with utmost efficiency and consideration. Indeed she discharged her duties in the role of the mother of the conference.

SUKCHAND

He is a real worker's leader. Husband and wife both work in the garden as does their 12-year-old daughter.

Sukchand has worked in the gardens for 27 years, his wife for 17. Their possessions, after these 44 years of combined labour are:

A tumble-down single-room hut, one third occupied by a cow and the rest by them, four children—two boys and two girls, four metal drinking glasses, two glass tumblers, three *thaalis*, two *kadhais*, one chopper, one torn *dhoti* and another in good condition, three saris between mother and daughters. Torn shirts on the two boys, one of whom is in a pair of shorts, the other in a breech clout. Ten chickens, two cows, a number of gunny sacks, a broken hurricane lantern and bow and arrows.

Their circumstances may be thought of as quite comfortable. Not the least because, in his wife's words, they own silver ornaments worth 30 rupees, even though Sukchand insists that they can't be worth more than 20.

During the first phase of the union movement (the struggle over rice), Sukchand led the movement to store the harvested rice with themselves rather than in the company's granaries. Moreover, he provided leadership during the 1944 movement to demand increased wages. The movement was successful. A very steady individual, he was a delegate at this year's All India Trade Union Congress. He is a party member as well as a member of the district committee.



16.5.47
1947



16.547

SURYAMANI

Sukchand's wife, party member, among the most conscientious and enthusiastic of the women party workers. Something of a daredevil, she leads the broomstick brigade. When asked what they'd do if the police arrived, her answer was, 'We're not weaker than the police in any way. We'll give 'em a whipping with our brooms!' She's taught their slogans to her youngest, a girl of 18 months, so well that the child can complete each one with the greatest ease. 'If we ever forget,' says Suryamani, 'our children will remind us.'

At 11 a.m. on 30 April 1947, the Superintendent of Police, complete with two armed policemen, turned up at the garden. He proceeded straight to the bungalow and ordered Rashmohan to see him there immediately. Rashmohan flatly refused to present himself at the bungalow. A group of workers, armed with bows and arrows, were holding a meeting near the bungalow. One of them went to the police officer and asked him to address his complaints to the meeting. The Superintendent lost control of himself. 'Who d'you think you are; d'you think you can frighten me with your bows and arrows? I'll shoot the lot of you right now; I'd like to see the bloody commies try and stop me!' The moment they heard this, the women gathered in a group and lay in front of the officer's vehicle and kept chanting, 'You can't leave without shooting.' The Superintendent was allowed to leave after he apologized. Suryamani was the leader of this band of women.

RASHMOHAN

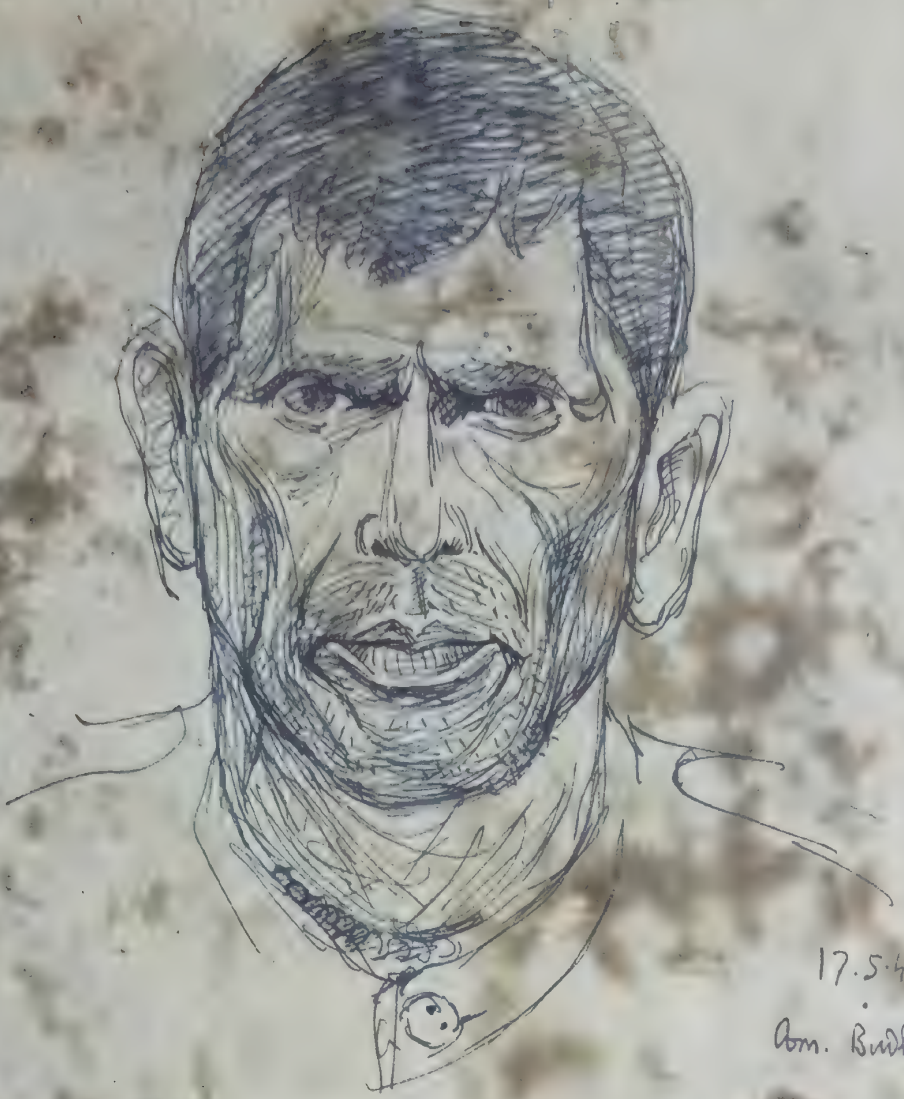
Taking the Oath: whenever a worker takes a solemn oath of any kind, he or she does it holding a brass urn filled with water, containing copper coins and *tulsi* leaves, decorated with mango leaves and flowers. They believe that any oath taken while 'holding the urn' is inviolate, for breaking it would offend the gods. When the union was being formed in this area, it was proposed that people would have to 'swear on the urn'. No one was agreeable to begin with; they kept looking at one another. It was at this stage that Rashmohan stepped forward to be the first to hold the urn and swear 'Lord Jagannath, you are my witness as I say to all my comrades that I will always obey the union's instruction and the fate of my comrades will be my fate.' After this, all the others present at the meeting also swore on the urn.

Rashmohan has procured a military uniform, which suits his rather military temperament. He is rather proud of the uniform. 'We aren't inferior to the company guards,' he keeps saying. At the mention of a photograph being taken, he hurried away, and came back having changed his clothes for the uniform. He is terribly straightforward. He is the leader of the local volunteers and a party member.

Currently, there are three cases against him at the courts: stealing from the factory, assault, tying up a watchman.



16.5.47



17.5.47

Am. Budhu Raju

BUDHU

Farmer, 60 years old.

A party member. He used to be a worker at the Barmasiya Tea Estate. About 12 years ago, a worker at the tea estate was shot dead by the Manager, one Hem Bhattacharya. The workers were utterly enraged and surrounded Bhattacharya and the police and gave them a frightful beating. Budhu was one of the principal leaders of this assault. Then they left in a group and scattered everywhere. Budhu came to Rangapam. He is one of the union's more militant members, fearless, never without his *lathi*.

There is one case against him. It is now known that he refused to pay the local moneylender Bhairav Mahajan his dues and, instead, beat him up in public.

He donated five *audis* of rice during the last strike. He also provided eight *audis* of rice for the conference along with lots of fresh vegetables.

ABALA

Kanai's wife, party member, daredevil.

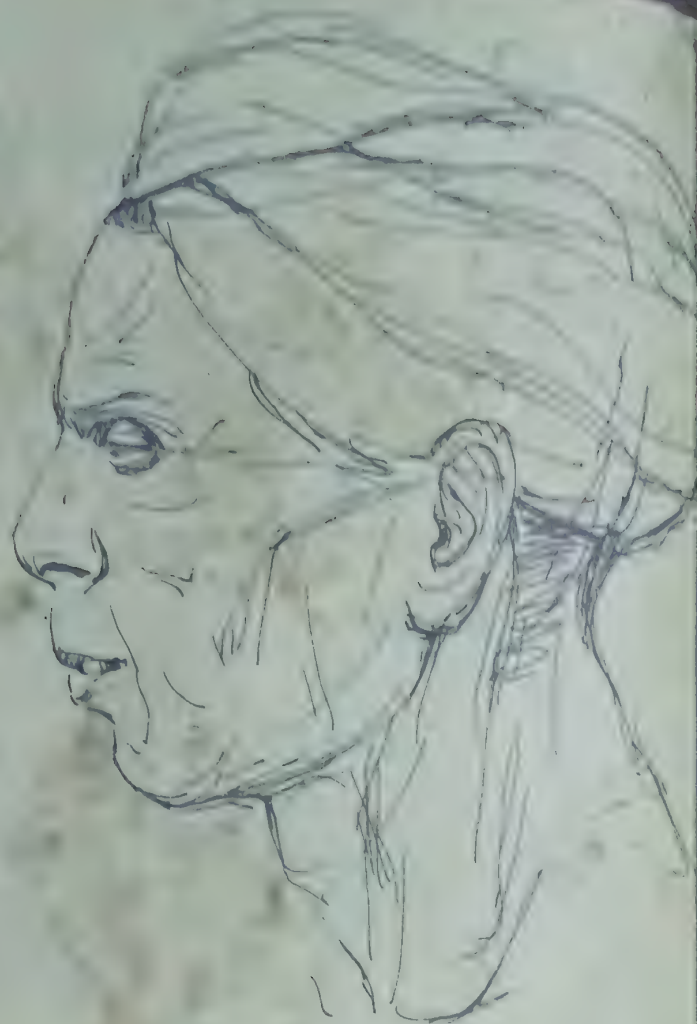
There is a convention in the tea gardens that a man with drinking water is present during plucking time. This allows thirsty workers to have a drink. When the *paaniwala* turned up some days ago, Abala told him on behalf of the women, 'You're a company stooge. We're not going to accept water from your hands.' The fellow retorted, 'I'm going to cast it on the ground, in each of your names, if you don't drink it.' The women were incensed by this comment. Abala said, 'You miserable wretch, are we supposed to be dead that you're going to cast water in our names? Try coming here again and we'll thrash you with our brooms!' From that day onwards, the women refuse to drink the water that the company provides and instead, bring their own drinking water in hollowed bamboo tubes.

Abala is considered to be one of the better orators among the women workers.

The other day she said, 'The Manager has asked me to come and work without pay at his residence. I hardly have the time to serve my own husband, why would I want to serve him? This kind of petty injustice is not going to be tolerated any longer!'



Abala
17.5.67



Subal mazi. 17.5.47

SUBOL MAZI

Party member.

Subol used to be a worker at Sujanagar Tea Estate and a militant trade unionist. He played a big role during the land occupation movement. He joined the strike called in response to the false cases filed against union leaders and workers. He led a struggle for three weeks against the police and company goons. Later, when the strike foundered through lack of leadership, he surrendered. Some months later, when the union leaders were freed, Subol and Bishu, along with about 45 other workers, left the garden. This was at the union's instructions. On the way out, the company goons looted them of 500 rupees. Moreover, they robbed Subol of 17 cows, 11 goats 14 chickens and various utensils. Tarak Patranabis, the Manager, promised to hand over all his belongings if only Subol came back to the garden. In addition, the Manager tried to offer him 1,000 rupees. Subol simply scorned all these inducements and left for Rangapani. He has filed criminal charges against the Sujanagar Manager and the cattle rustling goons. The case continues.

He continues to agitate against the company's tyrannical ways along with many others.

TUPU SINGH

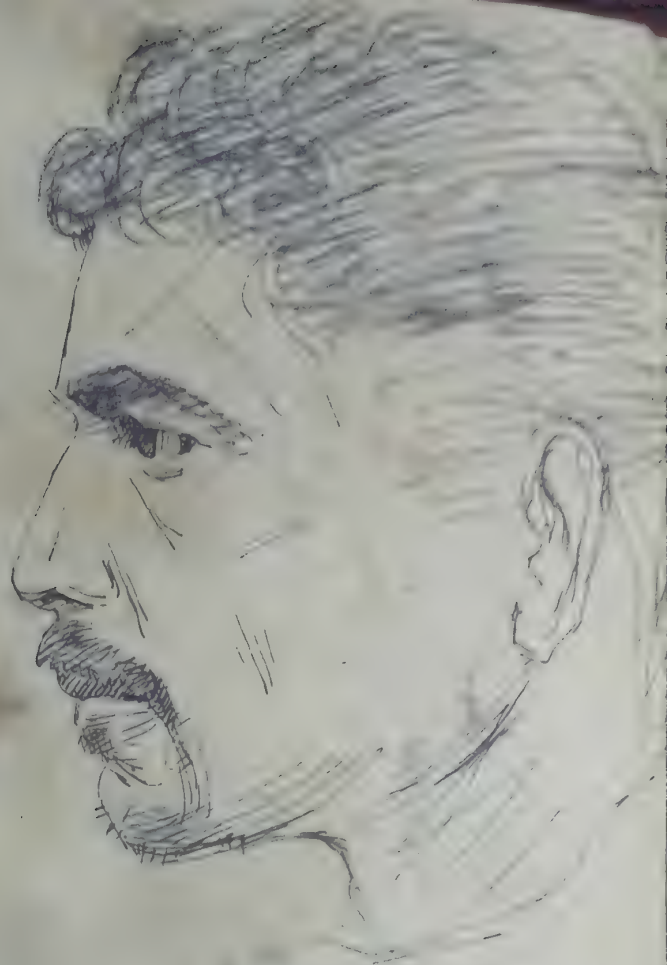
He used to work at Sujanagar as a foreman; he would also do the occasional job of delivering the post. He always had the ability to be a worker's leader. He was one of the founders of the Sujanagar-Barmasiya worker's union. While working as a messenger, Tupu Singh would also carry all the messages to and from the Sujanagar-Barmasiya Union. Bhuban Guha the Manager found out and tried to threaten Tupu, who answered him back as sharply. Following this, the Manager stopped using him for delivering mail. Unfortunately, no one else was willing to do the job. After about three or four days, Tupu was reinstated.

In 1946, when the false cases were filed against the union leadership at Sujanagar-Barmasiya, Tupu spent several days hiding in the woods in order to carry out his task of delivering instructions to the various gardeners. His companions were tigers, snakes, leeches, etc.

He was arrested some days later.

He spent two months in lock-up and came to Rangapuri after he was freed. He is a party member and one of the most militant of trade union workers.





Gm. Madhu

17.5.47

MADHU ORAON

Party member; member of the district committee.

Some demands were presented to the Manager and his Directors during the strike. Madhu lost his temper once the Superintendent started prevaricating and stood up holding a spade handle. '*Babu*, it's either your existence or ours. Our demands have to be accepted.'

'Madhu, listen to me,' said the Superintendent. 'Such extravagant claims . . .'

'It's not extravagant at all. This is a matter of our survival, a matter of our demands.'

The poor Superintendent was entirely cowed down.

TILOK ROY (80)

From Hazaribag with parents and brothers at the age of 12 or 13. All relatives dead now. First came to Rangapani, cleaned the forests, built houses.

From Rangamati to Rangapani. He used to work on Harry Sahab's sugarcane fields, cultivating the land. The amount of land he cultivated was eight *dron*. Harry Sahab sold his land and left. Sarada Lala, who bought the land, evicted these people through a mixture of violence and virtual highway robbery. He even stole their livestock, then filed cases against them for theft.



AFTERWORD

This journal is about an investigative visit to a plantation—to an institution where cash crops are grown for commercial purposes on the basis of coerced labour. Some points ought to be kept in mind about this. One: that coerced labour, in the form of slavery, has had a long, if dubious history. Slavery was known to, and played an important role in, all the ancient societies: Egyptians, Sumerian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Israelite and others. And, of course, in the modern era, slavery was a crucial money-earning business, indeed a key factor in the rise of the European capitalist economies, as well as the basis on which cash crops such as sugar and cotton were cultivated.

The other: that coerced labour has always been the foundation of the plantation systems. The Italian colonies of the late Middle Ages were not only large-scale plantation systems but also models for their modern counterparts in Spain, Portugal and America. Conditions were indescribable and the slave was a non-person, cut off from his own and all other society. It has been termed 'social death' by at least one authority.

The British ran plantations in India, raising cash crops such as indigo and, later, tea. In India, slavery in the sense of the auction block was not really present, what with the Anti-Slavery Bill and other laws. Though slavery persisted in the colonies for nearly 50 years after

the Bill, the tea gardens started after slavery was over everywhere in the Empire. Nevertheless, indentured serfdom played its part. Further, it is a reflection of the parlous conditions prevalent in the countryside, that peasants opted to work in the tea plantations (or estates) despite the appalling conditions, minuscule pay and the constant threat of violence. Being a non-person was very much a part of it; the social conditions have been described by Somnath Hore as '... a depraved social system entirely cut off from the world at large'. Most of them had nothing to call their own, in many cases, not even their girl children. A form of *droit de seigneur* was prevalent. It was, as Somnath-da, puts it in his opening sentence, '... a land of darkness ...'.

Nor did the conditions improve at all after the tea gardens were bought by Indian owners. Indeed, various things, the depression included, contributed to making matters worse. In this grim situation, a worker's union movement was born in the mid-1930s. The struggle ranged union men, organized by the Communist Party on one side against the owners, their thugs, the tea garden managers, and the constabulary on the other. It is a tribute to the organizers and activists that they managed, despite such powerful opposing forces, to wrench concessions out of the companies. It was to document this struggle that the Communist Party sent Somnath Hore, complete with sketchpad and journal. This book is the result.

Somnath Zutshi

April 2009

SOMNATH HORE (b. 1921, in Baroma, Chittagong) taught at Indian Art College and Delhi Polytechnic before coming to teach at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. Also Visiting Lecturer at M. S. University, Baroda, for a short time, Hore worked in various media—print-making, drawing and water-colour—before turning to sculpture in his later years. Author of *Tebhagar Diary* and *Aamar Chitro Bhabona*, Hore received the Padma Bhushan (posthumously), the Aban-Gagan Puroshkar, the Lalit Kala Ratna and the Rabindra Bharati University Award, among many others. Hore lived and worked in Santiniketan until his death in 2006.

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